

Love your car? Getting too attached could be costly

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Although Americans parted with nearly 700,000 old vehicles in last year's Cash for Clunkers program, many of them probably had a hard time letting go, say researchers at the University of Michigan.

Blame it on anthropomorphism—the tendency to ascribe human attributes to an inanimate object.

"Everyone knows someone with a beat-up old [car](#) that they just can't bear to get rid of, even as the car becomes unreliable and begins to act with 'a mind of its own,'" said Norbert Schwarz, a professor of marketing at U-M's Ross School of Business, professor of psychology in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, and research professor

at the Institute for Social Research.

"Although most people know that cars and other objects like computers are inanimate, at times they treat them as if they were alive," added Jesse Chandler, U-M doctoral student in [social psychology](#). "Most of us at some point have argued or pled with a computer, felt attached to a favorite sweater or expressed love for a car."

New research in April's *Journal of Consumer Psychology* by Schwarz and Chandler finds that even incidental cues that suggest that a product might be alive can make people feel reluctant to replace it. Furthermore, people induced to think of their cars as alive no longer care about how well they run when deciding whether or not to replace them.

"Much as people are reluctant to replace friends as they become old and cranky, they are also reluctant to replace 'living' products that no longer work properly," Chandler said.

The U-M researchers conducted two studies to test how anthropomorphic thought affects consumers' product replacement intentions.

They asked some participants in one study to describe their cars in technical terms (quiet, reliable) and other participants to describe their cars in personality terms (reserved, sympathetic). People who were asked to describe their cars in personality terms subsequently reported that they were less willing to replace their cars than people who did not. Furthermore, those who thought about their car in technical terms were more willing to replace poor quality cars than high quality cars, but this relationship vanished among participants who thought about their cars in personality terms.

In a second study, Chandler and Schwarz examined whether

anthropomorphic beliefs also made people interpret features of their car in social terms. Participants selected the color of their car from a group of color swatches that also provided a name for each color. Depending on condition, the color swatch was labeled with a "warm" or a "cold" name, for example, "summer sky" (warm) or "blizzard blue" (cold) for the color blue. They found that the color names made a profound difference, but only when people were also asked to think about their car's "personality."

"Just as people prefer other people who are interpersonally warm over people who are interpersonally cold, participants were also less willing to replace a 'warm' car than a 'cold' car when they had thought about the car's personality," Chandler said. "Hence, owners of a blue car were less willing to replace it when its color was named 'summer sky' rather than 'blizzard blue.'"

The researchers say their findings demonstrate that subtle anthropomorphic cues can influence how people think about their cars, and illustrate the potential power of marketing campaigns that depict products as alive. However, they also suggest that anthropomorphic beliefs may be somewhat of a mixed blessing for businesses and consumers.

"Anthropomorphic beliefs may potentially increase consumers' maintenance costs beyond economically defensible levels while reducing producers' sales," Schwarz said. "Further, anthropomorphic cues may direct attention away from some features and toward others, and could thus hurt products of superior technical quality, while benefiting competitors with more appealing 'interpersonal' features.

"Finally, [consumers](#) who spontaneously think of their cars in interpersonal terms, and give it a name and a gender, may spontaneously show the same hesitation to replace them."

Provided by University of Michigan

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